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After 31 years, former Mountie pleads guilty in spying case

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TORONTO - At the height of the Cold War 31 years ago, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police corporal, James Morrison, committed a crime that has haunted him ever since: Short of money, he betrayed a Soviet double agent to the Kremlin for the equivalent of one year's salary.

The double agent - code-named Gideon and described as the most important spy-turned-informer netted by the Canadians - was spirited back to Moscow and not heard of again.

Last week in a court in Ottawa, Morrison pleaded guilty to passing secrets to the Soviets. Now aged 69 and employed as a construction superintendent in British Columbia, Morrison will be sentenced in May.

Although Morrison first confessed to his superiors in 1957, he could not be charged because of a lack of corroborative evidence. He never would have been brought to justice but for his compulsion to confess. Finally, just over three years ago, he nailed himself by admitting his crime on television.

Thinly disguised in a black wig and false moustache, he appeared on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's public affairs program "Fifth Estate" and admitted that he had sold out Gideon for \$3,500, about what he was earning at the time as a corporal in the Mounties.

When the interviewer asked him if the consequence of his betrayal was probably the death of Gideon at the hands of the KGB, the Soviet secret police, he replied: "It would appear to be the standard procedure."

Gideon's real name apparently was Breck. He was infiltrated into Canada shortly after World War II and assumed the identity of a Canadian photographer named David Soboloff, who had emigrated to Russia some years earlier.

He became enamored of the Canadian way of life and offered himself to the Mounties, then Canada's counterintelligence agency,

as a double agent. He supplied them with the names of Soviet spies in Canada and the United States, cipher pads, dates and times of Soviet spy transmissions and other valuable information.

Volatile personality

The Soviet agent was a volatile personality racked by periodic bouts of self-hatred for having betrayed his country. "He'd get on the floor and cry and kick his feet like a sad, little child and call us curious names," a former superintendent, Terence Guernsey, recalled in court evidence last week.

At this time Morrison was engaged in surveillance duties. Guernsey said Morrison's colleagues knew him as "a flashy individual" who dressed well, smoked cigars, drove big cars, lived generally beyond his salary, and was "always robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Eventually, after one of the double agent's screaming fits against his handlers, Morrison contacted a KGB man attached to the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa and sold him the secret of Gideon. Not long after that, Morrison was caught for a comparative peccadillo. He had "borrowed" \$1,400 in RCMP funds with which he was supposed to pay a telephone bill accrued during a wiretapping operation. As punishment he was kicked out of counterintelligence and banished to detachment duty in a small town on the prairies, where he spent the rest of his service.

When Morrison's trial opened on Wednesday he pleaded not guilty. The following day he changed his plea after Judge Coulter Osborne of the Ontario Supreme Court ruled that the videotape of his television interview was admissible as evidence.

After the four-minute tape had been shown to the jury, Osborne said, "Justice has been done." Outside the court, Morrison's lawyer, John Nelligan, said: "He was submitted to a Chinese water torture for 30 years. We hope the last drip has fallen."